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INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 2966
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 1074

C O N F I D E N T I A L BAKU 000820

SIPDIS

EUR/CARC AND DRL FOR WENDY SILVERMAN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/01/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KDEM AJ

SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS IN AZERBAIJAN: PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS

Classified By: Political and Economic Counselor Robert Garverick for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On August 26 President Aliyev announced a pardon of 96 prisoners. Among these prisoners was Rasim Akberov who was arrested in 2000 on coup-plotting charges and sentenced to 15 years. Akberov was widely considered a political prisoner, and also quite ill. Also included in the pardon were five other people considered political prisoners by some Azerbaijani NGOs: Alexander Umnyashkin, Bayram Guliyev, Gabil Guliyev, Mobil Youluyev, and Ismayil Mammadov.

The pardon did not include the three imprisoned high-profile journalists, or the other four prisoners the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has called on GOAJ to release. Meanwhile, on August 27, two reporters for Radio Liberty and one additional reporter were beaten by police in the course of reporting a story in Nakhchivan. The journalists are well-known in the country and were attempting to report on the lack of freedom of assembly in the region. The occurrence of both these events within 24 hours is a signal of Azerbaijan's mixed record on human rights. END SUMMARY

¶2. (SBU) On August 26 President Ilham Aliyev announced a general pardon of 96 prisoners. Among these prisoners was Col. Rasim Akberov, a former military commander and the first person to receive the title "National Hero" of Azerbaijan. Akberov had been accused of plotting a coup and sentenced to 15 years imprisonment in 2000. All Azerbaijani human rights NGOs considered him to be a political prisoner, and PACE called for his release in its most recent June 2008 resolution due to Akberov's poor health.

¶3. (C) Five persons considered political prisoners by some Azerbaijani human rights NGOs were also included in the presidential pardon. They include: Aleksandr Umnyashkin, a former high-ranking official at the Ministry of Health arrested along with former Health Minister Ali Insanov; Ismayil Mammadov and Mobil Yolchuyev, arrested in connection with an alleged coup plot in 2000; and Bayram Guliyev and Qabil Guliyev, arrested in connection with former oil and gas executive and Speaker of Parliament Rasul Guliyev. Although these persons were not specifically mentioned by name in the most recent PACE resolution, the Council of Europe representative in Baku felt that the release of these prisoners was an important step toward fulfilling Azerbaijan's Council of Europe commitments.

¶4. (C) In a separate incident, on August 27 reporters for Radio Liberty Ilgar Nasibov and wife Malahat Nasibova, as well as Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety representative Elman Abbasov, were assaulted by a mob in the village of Nehram in Nakhchivan. The three journalists were

there to cover a small confrontation between local residents and police. Ilgar reports that upon arrival, the police fled, realizing that reporters were present. About a half hour later Ilgar reports that plain clothes representatives from several security forces returned and verbally assaulted the reporters. The confrontation then escalated and several people, including both the security services personnel and other local residents, physically assaulted the reporters. Ilgar reports that they were bruised but not seriously injured. Their cameras, tape recorders, and Malahat's mobile phone were all damaged. Once injured, no taxi would agree to take the three reporters back to Nakhchivan City, and they were forced to walk several kilometers.

15. (C) COMMENT: Despite the August 26 presidential pardon releasing some prisoners whose cases were politically motivated, the pardon did not include the three high-profile journalists who are currently in prison, or the four other prisoners PACE identified as needing immediate release due to health concerns. The fact that these journalists remain in prison, and that other journalists continue to undergo physical abuse during the course of their work, are signs of the limited progress on media freedom in Azerbaijan in the run up to the October 15 presidential election. END COMMENT
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